

# Exotists milked by Exotic People:

How Tuareg from Timia are instrumentalising Tourists to support their “exotic” village

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## **Abstract:**

Ethnotourism is in general criticised for its negative impacts on the culture of the visited ethnic group. The common argument presents those groups as economically and culturally vulnerable. Empirical research about the relations between indigenous Tuareg nomads of the little village Timia in the Air Mountains, West Africa, and western tourists has shown that the common argument against ethno-tourism bases on western concepts of exotism and exotic cultures, too.

The Tuareg from Timia had to adapt themselves over the last 100 years because of several dramatic changes of the political, economical, social, cultural and ecological circumstances. They are already deeply involved into the modernisation, even if many of them are still practicing traditional goat and camel breeding and nomadism. They are confronted with problems like desertification, overpopulation, lack of medical help and adequate schools, lack of work and adequate roads to export their harvest.

The Tuareg from Timia have had some experience with tourism in the late 80th until the outbreak of a Tuareg rebellion. Tourism re-started there in the late 90th. Interviews with the population about the impacts of tourism have shown that the overwhelming number of concerned people is demanding more tourism to get more access to external recourses. Almost nobody from the village - except some Diaspora Tuareg, living in Europe - criticised the visitors because of their western behaviour. The main strategy of the locals is to give the tourists the feeling to be very welcome, to be a friend of the village, and to come back to Timia again as a “foreigner”. “Foreigners” are defined by the local Tuareg as people who stay longer than tourists, who are interested deeply about the local problems and who try to help by supporting development projects.

Research about the development of tourism in Timia has shown that a recent number of tourists came back to Timia after their first visit to support development projects for the local population. In fact, the main help, the population from Timia receives, comes from former tourists who “transformed” from tourists into “foreigners”. Finally, Timia, who was deeply concerned by the drought in the summer of 2005, was better provided with millet than other, less “romantic Tuareg villages” because of significant financial support by former tourists.

This phenomenon shows that Roberts’ idea of “glocal solidarity” is profoundly enforced by direct contact between tourists and exotic people who have learnt to play their “role” of the friendly nomad, welcoming urban tourists seeking for exotism and emotional recognition, to exploit them better for the proper needs of the “exotic locals”.

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## **1. Drought in the Sahara: Tourists are helping Tuareg nomads**

In November 2004, the traditional salt caravans of the Tuareg nomads from the Air Mountains were heading south. But at that time the camels didn't carry any salt at all. They haven't walked the 700 miles of dry land through the Ténéré desert to pick up the “cantus” from the oasis Bilma, as the Tuareg nomads are used to every end of the raining seasons. But during the summer 2004, the rainfall in the West African state Niger was so poor that the camels didn't find enough good pastures anymore. Additionally, huge swarms of locusts had devastated what hasn't been dried out by the sun. Finally, there wasn't enough food in the Air for the camels to become strong enough to survive that long and exhausting march through the desert. To save at least the live of their camels, their main fortune, the Tuareg nomads had to head south without their merchandise to reach more humid climes, where their animals could find more food to gaze.

About half a year later, in late spring 2005, the first caravans returned from the south. But this time, they didn't carry new stocks of millet, the staple food of the Tuareg nomads. Also in the south, lack of rain had caused terrible bad harvests. The rise of the prise for millet up to five times its normal level was the first consequence of this catastrophe. For the greatest part of the population of Niger, which is struggling to survive even in “good” years, this indicated the rise of a terrible famine like it has been experienced in 1980-1985 at last. But while in that time pictures of dying babies at the TV animated the western states to combat that human tragedy, this time the silent suffering of millions of people were peaked by daily news about the “victory” in Iraq and the success of our athletes at the Olympic Games in Athens.

The Tuareg nomads from the region of Timia in the centre of the Air Mountains had a kind of luck in this situation of menacing disaster. The non-governmental organisation „Les Amis de Timia“ ([www.lesamisdetimia.org](http://www.lesamisdetimia.org)), founded by the former Sahara-tourist Michel Bellevin, started an additional campaign. From hundreds of former people, who have once visited that beautiful village, and other supporters from France, Germany and Austria, “Les Amis the Timia” collected some 17.000 Euro. The author alone, also member of “Les Amis the Timia”, were able to collect almost 3.000 Euro among friends who has been former tourists to Timia. With that money, 52 tons of provisions were able to be bought to prevent 20.000 people living around Timia from starving during the time until the next, hopefully better harvest.

But what would have happened to the people of Timia without the immediate support of that organisation of former visitors to Timia and without the unhesitating reaction of enthusiastic Sahara-travellers? If there were not those “Friends of Timia”, would the people of Timia then all

have become victims of a silent disaster, ignored by a rich and bored Europe as it happened to the civil war in Sudan? This would mean then, that tourism to an exotic culture contributes to the chance to stimulate and strengthen a sort of global solidarity. The result of field research done by the author in the years 1999 – 2004 (Friedl 2004, 2005) supports this assumption.

## **2. Tuareg nomads, mythic masters in the art of surviving in the Sahara?**

The Tuareg people are part of the Berbers, the autochthon population of North Africa. In consequence of the Arabian occupation in the 7th century, they moved south into the region of the central Sahara. Today, they are living as minorities of several states of North and Western Africa (Libya, Algeria, Niger, Mali, Burkina Faso and Nigeria). Until the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, the former „Lords of the Sahara“ had been politically dominant, controlling the main trading routes through the Sahara. One part of their economic basis also has been “rezzus”, raids against settlements of peasants.

Subjected by the French colonial power at the end of the 19th century, the heterogeneously organized Tuareg societies were submitted to substantial change of their political, economical and social reality. While former politically dominant groups had to choose between subjection and expatriation, some groups even took profit of the new French order. That was the case of the “Kel Aïr”, the „people from the Aïr Mountains“. This part of the Tuareg has a specific social construction as neither have they ever been subjected by other Tuareg groups nor have they ever subjected anybody. In consequence they didn't show the feudalistic, hierarchical socio-political structure which is widespread among Tuareg societies (Bernus 1993). Also their economical system differed a lot as they practiced a strategy of risk-management by combining goat and camel breeding with caravan trade and horticulture. Before the French occupation, their main economical problems resulted from common rezzus against the caravan as well as against their oasis villages. This situation changed dramatically with the new French order, resulting into a unique rise of the salt caravan trade from the Aïr Mountains to Bilma and further south to Nigeria, as well as the significant extension of horticulture within the Aïr mountains (Spittler 2002).

The French officers, mostly aristocrats perceived “their” Tuaregs as a kind of their “counterparts”: noble, feudal knights of the desert, true, legitimate lords of the “primitive” black, partly enslaved population, “archaic” inheritors of the erstwhile French knighthood and so, consequently, the likes of them (Henry 1996). To conserve this assumed, ideologically justified “lordly” reality of the Tuareg society, the French colonial officers practiced a kind of ambiguous policy. At the one hand they subdued the black population under the French ideals of self-determination, enlightenment and modernisation by forcing them to attend French schools; at the other hand they protected “their noble” Tuaregs against social change by supporting and subsidizing their traditional structures like nomadism, caravan trade and folklore (Bourgeot 1995).

The consequence of this “strategy” became obvious at the time after the independence of the West African nations. Suddenly, the Tuaregs found themselves without their former economical and political resources and without the support of their French favourers. In this new situation they slipped into the role of a maladjusted maverick within the national state. Their doom as their final destiny seemed to be clear as they found themselves confronted with a terrible drought, followed by a destructive famine in the 1970<sup>th</sup> and 1980<sup>th</sup>. Many thousands of nomads had to leave their devastated living space to survive as refugee in camps in Algeria, subsidized by the European Community. Many of the young nomads, having lost everything and so called “Ishomars”, a Tamasheq word coming from the French expression “chomeur” (unemployed), followed the call of

Gaddafi to become a fully accepted member of the „Islamic Army“, Gaddafis “anti-colonial” weapon to intervene in Chad and Lebanon (Salifou 1993).

### **3. Tuaregs and Sahara-Tourism: a passionate contradiction?**

Giving back the honour to his Tuareg people was the aim of Mano Dayak (1996), a born nomad from the Air Mountains, who followed an impressive career, finally making a university diploma in France and gathering a lot of famous, important and influential French people around him. His main ability was to understand and to exploit the fascination of the French for “their” Tuaregs. Back in Agadez, he started to engage himself in the development of tourism in the Agadez region, the Far North of the West African State Niger, consisting of the volcanic Air Mountains saurian graves and the Tuareg culture, the vast Ténéré with its unique, huge sand dunes and the impressive eroded plateau of Djado in the Far East with its rock paintings. For Mano, tourism was a kind of development tool to support “his people” by creating jobs for nomads as driver and tour guide, and by subsidizing nomad villages with the profit of his tourism agency “Temet voyages”.

Finally, tourism was also a kind of marketing tool for the Tuareg by bringing tourists into the living space of the “knights of the desert”. But there was a crucial limit for Mano: He absolutely condemned “zoo tourism” (Dayak 1992, S. 78; Dayak 1996, S. 178), a term used by Mano to describe his perception of the interaction between tourists and nomads, understood as an unequal relation between powerful observers and victimized, gazed “objects”. In opposition to any contact between the nomad population and western tourists, he favoured a kind of controlled “personal experience” of tourists, perceiving their “personal Tuareg” as a kind of exotic, reliable guide and “friend” out there in the dangerous, fascinating Sahara. Certainly, the frame of this “theatre” (Goffman 1983) was always the tourist group as a kind of “environmental bubble” (Urry, 1996, p. 836) within the alien world of the desert.

Mano was quite successful. Thanks to his excellent contacts to French journalists and the elites of Paris, weekend-trips to Agadez and to the dunes of Temet became a booming experience. In the same time, the French’s sympathy for their most beloved “inheritors” grew also. One of the top-events of the tourist season in Agadez was the Rally Paris-Dakar, taking their day-off there, in the “door to the Ténéré”. As Mano had almost a monopoly position concerning the tourist and media contacts to French media and the management of the Rally (Thierry Sabine), he was able to earn and invest significant amounts of money for the construction of wells, nomad schools and wards in the Air Mountains without “bother” the Tuareg population by tourism.

The concerned population did not always agree with this paternalistic policy. In the early 1990<sup>th</sup>, the people of the nomad village of Timia started a kind of “rebellion” against this artificial isolation from tourism. While being situated directly on the main dirt road through the Air Mountains, the Kel Timia (Tamasheq: the people from Timia) were forced to accept that the tourist groups of Mano never stopped for a visit by “leaving nothing but dust”, as they expressed it. They asked Mano for more active participation in tourism activities. Finally, Mano promised to change his policy, but the emerging rebellion of Ishomars in the meantime caused the total collapse of tourism in Niger for more than five years.

In the early 1990<sup>th</sup>, the new, democratically elected government of the Republic of Niger invited the Tuareg refugees in Algeria as well as the young Ishomars, fighting as mercenaries for Gadhafi, to return to Niger. There was even a program to integrate the Ishomars into the national security institutions, financed by funds of the European Community. Finally, those people found themselves again in badly organized refugee camps. The former mercenaries attacked a police

station to get arms, starting a rebellion against the national state. Mano, who became one of their leaders, exploited his contacts to France by starting a systematic propaganda, spreading the image of a “Tuareg genocide” caused by “black oppressors”, reacting in a kind of “revenge” against “their former lords” (Dayak 1996a, Salifou 1993). Quite successful, this campaign led to a broad financial, political and logistic support by France and several European organisations and groups. In the same time, the image of the Tuaregs as a “perishing” culture which has to be protected and conserved, became increasingly dominant in Europe (Friedl 1992, Grégoire 1999, Bode 2000).

Pretty soon, the rebellion developed its specific reality by collapsing into more than 15 different fronts, all following individual interests, fighting against each other and, though, rattening several initiatives for a common peace treaty. Those who suffered most of this war hassled by the national army as well as by the rebels, were the Tuareg population. Finally in the middle of the 1990<sup>th</sup>, it was them, who didn’t support the rebels anymore. This new situation forced the several fronts to accept a common peace treaty, signed in 1997. This treaty promised the integration of the rebels into the national security bodies and the nomination of a leading rebel chief and former assistant of Mano Dayak, Rhissa ag Boula, for the post of a Minister of Tourism. Additionally, it was promised to liberalise the national regulation about the tourism economy.

As soon as the new situation was more or less accepted among the rebels, tourism turned pretty fast into the new “goldfield”, being perceived as a way to make easy money. Equipped with all-terrain vehicles, stolen from development organisations during the rebellion, a fast growing number of former rebels founded their own travel agency. At the end of the year 1999, some five dozens of agencies competed for a few hundred clients in Agadez. The main service competences those agencies were able to offer were nothing but abilities in orientation, driving, cooking and the French language as the employees were normally nomads and ex-rebels, missing any formal education. Because of these circumstances, the former product policy of Mano Dayak became necessarily reproduced. Once again, like ten years before, western “aliens” were navigated by native coxes in “Toyota-UFOs” through the moonscape of the Sahara, far apart from villages. This time the motive for this approach was not to protect nomads from “zoo tourism” but to protect visitors from “annoying” children and beggars, as many chiefs of tour operators in Agadez pointed out their position (Friedl 2005).

#### **4. No way back for the „Tuareg museum“**

The region of Agadez was “discovered” in the late 1990th by two totally different types of tourists:

1. The “classical” Sahara tourist looking for impressive landscapes, dunes and other non-cultural attraction
2. A kind of “Tuareg fetishist” hoping to get their chance to get in contact with the “real, authentic” Tuareg culture.

The second type of Agadez tourist is more often travelling individually then in groups and with tour operators. Some of these “hardcore Tuareg fans” even start a part-time live in Agadez, financed by activities as consultants for development organisations, as multilingual tour guides or by creating their own tour agency even if this is illegal for foreign nationals. The main success of the latter in competing local agencies is basing on their strategy of controlling and manipulating information about the Tuareg, the security standard and other facts important for potential clients from Europe. This is one of the reasons why the image of the “endangered Tuareg culture” is still alive and touching: It is part of the Tuareg myth which brings quite a lot post-modern Europeans on the search for a better world to the Sahara...

The author himself was invited in the function of a journalist by such a “Tuareg expert” in the year 1997 to join a journey to the Aïr Mountains. The final reason for this travel was to collect

information about the situation of the population after the Tuareg rebellion for newspapers and magazines (Friedl 1998). The program of this journey had promised the visit of the village Timia in the heart of the Aïr Mountains. Finally, the group of Austrian travellers passed Timia, but without stopping there. This was explained by the tour guide, an Austrian female “hardcore Tuareg fan” living in Agadez, with her intention to prevent the intimacy of the village from being disrupted by tourists.

In that time, the author was quite impressed by this apparently sensible and thoughtful position which finally was the reason to start a long-time research about the justification of tourism development in a region with nomads from an ethical point of view. Finally, the results of this study, lasting from 1999 until 2004, were able to prove that the position of that Austrian “hardcore Tuareg expert” didn’t correspond at all to the current wishes, needs and constraints of the Kel Timia. There was nobody among all the 54 interviewed members of the population, neither goatherds, blacksmiths, politicians, students or school directors, who argued against participation in tourism and for “cultural protection” and isolated by tour operators (Friedl 2004).

Tourism, in fact, means a lot for the Kel Timia. From tourism, they are expecting as well material as ideal exchange, the selling of handicrafts and groceries as well as entertainment, discussions and contacts to Europe. A very important aspect of their image of tourism is their long term expectation. In the point of view of the Kel Timia, former visitors would return again with material help and even with development projects to support the village. According to their view, though, “tourists” would finally become “foreigners”. A “tourist” is for a Kel Timia somebody who “travels just for fun, buys a lot of things, takes photographs and who is always in a hurry”. In contrast to a “tourist”, a “foreigner” is perceived as a person who comes because of a “serious” purpose like development or a research projects, and who “takes his time and listens to the people“. To support the “transformation” of a “tourists” into a “foreigners”, once returning to Timia with a profitable development project, the Kel Timia believe in the necessity to enthruse visitors for the village and its population, to create an emotional band between them. That’s why, following the “psycho-logic” of the Kel Timia, why they try to impress tourists by fascinating Tuareg festivals and folklore. As tourists are making a lot of photographs from these spectacles, events like these are perceived by the Kel Timia as the “best promotion“ they could get for their village and their people.

By this strategy, the Kel Timia don’t want to maximize the number of visitors as a priority but to maximize the length of their stay. The longer visitors stay in Timia, the more they have the chance to see and buy some of the local crafts, and the more they might fall in love with the Kel Timia, changing from the role of a distanced “tourist” in a hurry to a remaining, patient “foreigner”, getting emotionally and practically involved into affairs of the locals to become attached. This person would finally come back to visit again “his” Timia – and to “save” it...

In fact, there is a lot to save in Timia. Since the last thirty years, there are six times more people living here then before. In the same time, there has mean measured a reduction of 30% of rain. Droughts are much more frequent than it was before. Those droughts are devastating the pastures, which is the reason why more and more nomads start with horticulture. But there are also limits for that. In the meantime, both fertile soil as well as water becomes rare. Finally, another drought, lasting for more than two years, would force many Kel Timia to take a choice between looking for a job as an illegal unskilled worker in Libya or to find a place in the slums of Agadez or some mega cities in West Africa...

One of the main problems, the Tuareg are increasingly confronted with, is the consequences of desertification (Hammer, 2000). This is the expansion of infertile soil, caused by clearing, overuse and erosion. Only in the Sahara, some thousands of acres of fertile soil get lost every year by desertification. The growing population accelerates this process as more people need more pastures,

more soil for farming, more food, more water and more fire wood. The soil becomes increasingly overused. Finally, unemployment and poverty force people to cut wood as a last chance to earn money to feed their family. But cutting wood means enforcing erosion.

A new factor of desertification is climate change, resulting in more frequent climatic extremes like droughts, thunderstorms and floods, natural phenomena which are all supporting the process of desertification. From this point of view, the wish of the Kel Timia for tourism leads to a dramatic dilemma: At the one hand, tourism allows new chances for employment and income, which don't support the overuse of soil; on the other hand, tourists come to Niger by airplanes. Their emissions are crucial for the slow and silent destruction of their environment by causing climate change...

The Kel Timia have a clear answer on all of this: They have to live here and know, they have to feed their children, and they can't think about what will be in fifty years. Their solution for their complex problems is, nowadays, always the same: "We need a project!" ("Il faut un projet!")

## 5. The white „rescuer“

This expectation of the Tuareg is a consequence of their experience. Their first "rescuer" was the German ethnologist Gerd Spittler, who was able to realize personally the impacts of the long drought in the 1970<sup>th</sup>, devastating for the village and its people. In that period, the starving camels were too weak to survive the salt caravan to Bilma. To prevent the caravan system of the Kel Timia from collapsing, Spittler started a collection of money among his friends in Germany to substitute the caravan to Bilma by buying ordering salt from there by trucks. Provided with salt, the Tuareg were able to lead their caravan directly to the more fertile south to feed their animals and to change salt against millet. Finally, Spittler helped the Kel Timia to maintain their caravan system (Spittler 1993). In the following years, the German development organisation gtz ("Deutsche Gesellschaft für technische Zusammenarbeit") realized quite a lot of projects in and around Timia.

The biggest success of the Kel Timia to „convert“ a tourist to a „friend of Timia“ was the case of Michel Bellevin from France. He visited Timia in the year 1997 during a round-trip and perceived the Kel Timia as suffering from drought and isolation. Back home in France, the retired engineer founded the association "Les Amis de Timia" ("The Friends of Timia"). Its explicit aim was – and still is – to bring urgently needed help and to support the development of Timia (Les Amis de Timia 2006). The first activities of the association were concerning the creation of a stock of provisions for new cases of emergency, the support of the farmers and nomads, of the health and education service, the feeding of malnourished children as well as the "maintenance of the Tuareg culture" by subsidizing the caravans.

Those activities showed a strong momentum as they were increasingly expanded and professionalized. The projects become better applied to the needs of the population, Bellevin and his team took more and more into account inner conflicts of the Kel Timia; the population around the village as well as partner villages became members of the program; reports and evaluations became finally standard as well as public relations activities and charity events. In the meantime, "Les Amis the Timia" has developed from an ambitious initiative of an emotionally touched tourist to a professional, serious organisation with more than 250 members. The activities are financed by its members, by subsidies of French public institutions, by sponsoring, public events, selling of handicrafts from Timia and so on. To motivate visitors of those events in France to buy and to donate, finally to support the financial result of solidarity, performances of "real" Kel Timia in their traditional outfit are quite a common strategy of the "Amis the Timia".

In the year 2002, this engagement became well and established in a sustainable way by the institution of an official partnership between Timia and Louvrier, the hometown of Michel Bellevin. Since that time, an increasing number of people from the region around Timia take benefit from the activities of the organisation. Nowadays, also scholarships are given to pupils and students of Timia; the constructions of a high school and a little hospital as well as the development of a regional kind of social insurance system are the next bigger projects for Timia.

## 6. Tourism as a way to a „global mercy“?

These presented, impressive engagements seem to be the expression of a very intensive emotional relation of each helping person. The ethnologist Gerd Spittler lived for several years in Timia. In that time, he came even to the point where he thought about moving definitely to Timia, marrying a local woman and becoming a Kel Timia himself. In these years, he even had the desire to protect “his Timia-World” against any western influence. This was his reason why he never received visitors from Europe in Timia, but somewhere “outside” (Spittler 1998).

Some similar observation could be made about Michel Bellevin. In the first years of his activities in Timia, he seemed to be very sceptical against any tourist activities concerning Timia. He also didn't like to speak about his activities to the public. Finally, he didn't show any interest for the measurements and recommendations of the author concerning the planning and development of tourism in Timia. This behaviour gave the impression that Bellevin would have been afraid to lose his monopoly of mercy by the helping activities of anybody else. Schmidtbauer (2002) was able to show on the example of professions in the field of social services the correlation between helping activities, affection and dependency between the “strong” helping and the “weak” helped person.

Phenomena like the two described ones are easy to find quite often in Agadez nowadays. Most of these “development projects” are single initiatives, realized by the foundation of a non-governmental organisation or single supplies of food, money or other goods. Typical for most of these initiatives is the fact that almost always there was a tourist trip at the start of such an engagement, and this trip allowed enough time and opportunities for intensive, emotionally touching encounters.

A possible explanation for this phenomenon gives the model of Ulrich Becks (1997) “global mercy” of a post-modern European society which lives and loves increasingly in a way Beck calls “a polygamy of locality” (“ortspolygam”). This society has to find substitutes for the collapsing traditional structures which are locally defined. Nowadays Europeans increasingly experience the deprivation of stable relationships as a kind of loss of appropriate “projection screen” for long-lasting emotional “investments”. The liberalisation of the economy constrains increasingly and more often the change of the working place, the residence and finally also the relationships. The mobilisation of the professional life as well as the private live is followed by the mobilisation of values and views of life. Finally it seems as the post-modern citizen becomes a nomad on his quest for economical, religious and emotional resources for the price at the expense of time. The more we are mobile, the more we are “on the move” and the more often we have to adapt ourselves to new circumstances and contexts, the less time we have to stay: We are missing the time to gain intimacy and familiarity by becoming acquainted with somebody. But this is an indispensable condition for a long-lasting and satisfying relationship.

The loophole to get out of this time-familiarity-dilemma of post-modern relationships seems to be the modification of the common paradigm for a “good relationship”. By giving up the paradigm of mutual confidence that the partner would be “true” or “authentic” and replacing it by a new

paradigm of the best possible coordination of the partners mutual expectations and reactions during the short time of being together, the chance for longer lasting partnerships within an increasingly mobile society could be maximized.

The author will call this second one the paradigm of post-modern relationships in time of increasing mobility, or, briefly, the paradigm of mobile relationships.

From that point of view, the people in the south may raise their chance to acquire a “project” or any other support by western people to ensure their struggle for life for a certain amount of time, as far as they succeed to

1. play the role of the “bon sauvage“ who seems to be menaced by the “banishment out of paradise”
2. for those Europeans who are looking for the “bon sauvage” and who are willing to “save” him
3. by confirming their believe of being able to support the “bon sauvage” in a constructive and sustainable way in his fight for a “dignified life” and against “poverty and calamity”
4. by initiating a new or supporting an existing project,
5. and finally by confirming their impression, that in return for this mercy, strong bonds of „true“ and „long lasting“ friendship as well as thankfulness will emerge between them.

The reader will realize immediately the apparent contradiction between the image of „true“ friendship at the one hand and the expectation of thankfulness at the other. But this apparent contradiction will disappear at once as soon as this relationship is evaluated on the base of the paradigm of mobile relationships. In the new “economy of stimulating solidarity and charity” time for clearing up misconceptions of each other and insofar for disillusioning the expectations and projections is missing anyway.

A tourist simply doesn’t have the time to reflect and to understand the “real” way how a Tuareg nomad “really” thinks and feels. (Finally, due to the fact of fundamental biological constraints of our instruments of perceiving and constructing reality, our senses and specifically our brain, and insofar due to the self-referential structure of “understanding” (Foerster, 2002, Roth, 2003, Watzlawick et al, 2000, Glasersfeld, 1997), nobody can ever “really” understand what anybody else then himself “really” thinks or feels.) A tourist isn’t looking for “real” things anyway. He just wants to “recognize” his clichés.

In this respect, for the Kel Timia as well as for the “merciful” visitor it is only relevant how good they both “play” their “roles” of their “theatre of friendship”. This could be compared with the ritual of a post-modern “week-end relationship”: Both partners try to take profit of their time sharing together the best way possible by playing their specific part at the best. By doing that, in return, they are maximizing their chance to get their emotional needs satisfied by their partner. To ensure to fulfil the intention of this ritual, both partners have to prevent the involvement of everyday troubles. These problems are reserved for “normal” times without this “special” partner for “special” times to fulfil “special” emotional needs.

This phenomenon was already observed by the American sociologist Cleo Odzer (1994) while studying prostitution in tourist destinations on the example of Thailand. Odzer was able to show that most of the prostitutes came from the far Northeast of Thailand, where the social position of women is very low. By leaving their villages to work as prostitutes in the tourism centres in Bangkok, the women were able to earn enough money even to support their families financially. Thus, they were able to gain much more prestige among their family members by staying personally independent, which would be absolutely unimaginable for middle-class Thai women. To maximize their income and to ameliorate their working conditions, those prostitutes tried to suggest their “clients” to stay in a “romantic” relationship with “real romantic” feelings involved, instead of

having just a simple exchange of money and sex. By this strategy, the girls tried to convince their client to support her “beloved girlfriend” by additional benefits like gifts, money or even a marriage. As soon as a client tried to convince his “girlfriend” to replace her job as a prostitute by a worse paid “morally clean” job without giving her the guarantee to marry her, the women immediately broke up their “business connection” to look for another client which could fit better as a “romantic” and supportive partner.

Eric Leed (1993) already demonstrated this economic exchange of sexuality against urgently needed goods between on the example of locals and commercial travellers in central Asia. There are quite some resemblances in the Austrian tourism, where some German tourists are consuming quasi-emotional benefits, allocated by their Austrian hosts. Vester (2005) interprets this well-known phenomenon as a well coordinated “holiday theatre”. Everybody plays perfectly his role to get what he wants by giving what he means that his counterpart wishes to get: (well staged) cosiness for good money...

In the case of the Kel Timia, western “exotists” expect certainly less “cosiness” but the fulfilment of their illusion of simplicity, stability and perdurability of the “good old times”, which got lost in our western, post-modern world. Precisely because “globalisation“ is perceived as a threat for the “Tuareg world“, help in the name of solidarity and mercy is perceived as a way to save this “Tuareg world“. This “Tuareg world“ finally represents nothing but the own imagination of the “last paradise”. That’s why saving the “Tuareg world” at last means saving oneself.

## **7. Tour guides, catalysers of solidarity?**

The „holiday theatre“ of guests from Hamburg and hosts from Tyrol may already be a well-rehearsed ritual. But in the “theatre” of Europeans and Tuareg nomads, there are still many mistakes in the arrangement. Missing language ability, xenophobia, the tendency of tourists to avoid contact and finally the structure of a travel program are important factors on Sahara trips which could prevent the minimum of contact necessary for any encounter which allows a mutual satisfying communication process. Therefore trekking trips to the village of the local tour guide are excellent ways of travelling. In such a situation, the local tour guide is in a mediating position to help both hosts and guests to overcome their timidity. Quite successful to reach this point are also visits of schools, where tourists and children can get to know each other by singing songs, make jokes, telling stories etc. To the authors experience those situations could be a great fun for both tourists and pupils. The tourists can also distribute some gifts like pencils to the children to gain “altruistic capital”.

This process of bringing together persons of different cultures to develop a long-lasting relationship of exchange emotional feedback against material help is certainly a tightrope walk. Certainly nobody can enforce such a process of mutually satisfying communication. In fact, every action taken to support such a process has to be adapted on the specific culture of the “environmental bubble”, both of the tourist group and of the hosts. Finally, it has to be accepted if some tourists prefer walking on dunes to watch the sunset instead of walking into villages to talk to locals...

## **8. The sustainability of projects initiated by tourists?**

Sustainability as a scale for measuring the success of projects becomes increasingly questionable in a world of expanding mobility and accelerating change. Not only the “rest of the world”, also the western world is suffering increasingly from this change. More and more Europeans are employed in terminated projects while live-long jobs become an exception. Even old institutions like

universities have to struggle for financial resources by developing a successful “culture of project applications”. Did finally also the people in the “south” become a part of this mobilized, post-modern “project world”, where everybody is constrained (or has the chance) to play his own role? What alternatives do the Tuaregs from Timia have to assure their survival? Is the alternative of successfully playing the part-time role of the “amiable and salvageable bon sauvage” for tourists that bad? Isn’t it finally, in the face of alternatives like famine, slums or civil war, a chance?

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